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**FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 25th February 2018: Ananthagiri Hills. Meeting point: Punjagutta (opp. Mangatrai Pearls), 6.30AM.**

Besides being a pleasant woodland walk, Ananthagiri has always been very productive from the birding viewpoint, and is a paradise for forest birds. One can see Flycatchers, White-eyes, Chloropsis, Orange-headed Thrush, Nightjars, among others. The Indian Pitta and the Brown Fish Owl have been reported earlier. This would be a half-day trip. Carry water and breakfast. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

**INDOOR MEETING: Thursday, 22nd February 2018, 6.00PM: TALK BY DR. KARTHIKEYAN VASUDEVAN: TROPICAL HERPETOFAUNA OF THE MOUNTAINS AND ISLANDS IN INDIA**

Dr. Karthikeyan Vasudevan, Ph.D., Senior Principal Scientist, CSIR is the head of the Laboratory for the Conservation of Endangered Species (LaCONES), located at Attapur, Hyderabad. He is a herpetologist and ecologist working in the area of conservation biology.

The tropics are known for their high species richness and endemism. Species richness is further accentuated by geological features such as mountains and islands, both of which India has. In the talk, Dr Vasudevan will explore the patterns and processes involved in shaping species richness in frogs and reptiles in these areas.

## Trip Report – Pulicat & Nelapattu, December 2017

Ambika Pradhan

**Spot-billed Pelican** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Day 1: Sullurpet

As the sleepy town of Sullurpet was gearing up for the annual 'Flamingo Festival', we went there for our Annual Waterfowl Census (AWC). A team of four – Lawrence uncle, Guru, Jayati and I – started from Hyderabad on December 23, 2017, and reached Sullurpet early next day. After a quick couple of hours of sleep, and a hearty breakfast with Umesh and Shivaji who joined us from Chennai, and Naveena who came from Tirupati, we geared up for the day ahead. Starting the count with water bodies around Sullurpet, we first headed to Chinnanna Cheruvu, one of the water bodies we cover every year. Having spotted only few waterbirds like Grey Heron (*Ardea cinereal*), Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) and Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*), we headed to our next location, Peddanna Cheruvu. Although the lake looked empty in the beginning, birds slowly started showing up one after the other.

**Fulvous Whistling-duck** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

We spotted many ducks like Fulvous Whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*), Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*), Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) and Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), in good numbers. The Tufted Ducks, especially, seemed to be more than 150 in number!

**Tufted Duck** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

We spotted several other species too, like Little Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax niger*), Caspian Terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*) and Brown Shrikes (*Lanius cristalus*).

**Caspian Tern** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

**Brown Shrike** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Satisfied with the good numbers, we moved ahead to Minjur Lake. En route, the roads were lined with lush green paddy fields, dotted with Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*), Little (*Egretta garzetta*) and Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) and Asian Openbills (*Anastomus oscitans*).

**Asian Openbill** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

We also spotted many Wood Sandpipers (*Tringa glareola*) bobbing about occasionally, accompanied by smaller waders like Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*) and Lesser Sand Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) probing the shallow waters in the fields. As we reached Minjur, we spotted a few Spot-billed Pelicans (*Pelecanus philippensis*) and Painted Storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*). While counting the number of Storks and Pelicans, a big flock of Whiskered (*Chlidonias hybrida*) and Caspian Terns arrived near the tank. Much to my delight, these terns were hunting very close to where we stood, letting us have a close look at these skilful hunters.

**Painted Stork** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

A little way ahead from Minjur, we encountered a water body having a mixed flock of Northern Shovelers, Eurasian Wigeons (*Anas penelope*) and Northern Pintails. Further ahead of this flock, was another mixed flock of waders, consisting mainly of Plovers and Sandpipers.

**Mixed flock of waders** (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

As all these birds peacefully foraged in the water, a Harrier swooped into action, quickly scanning the lake for its prey. Having seen the raptor, all the ducks took off at once, resulting in a huge cloud of birds! We couldn't get a good look at the Harrier, but based on what we could see, it seemed to be the Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*).

**Mixed flock of birds in flight** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

On the way back from Minjur Lake, as we stopped for another quick scan, we spotted some Whiskered Terns and a few Eurasian Spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia*) flying overhead. The day ended on a good note with a sighting of a Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*) late in the evening.

Day 2: SHAR Road

The first day's count proved to be very fruitful and our ecstatic bunch visited SHAR road in the hope of waders, small and big. Moments after entering the road, a flock of Black-headed Munias (*Lonchura malacca*) greeted us, as also the mixed flock of Plovers foraging on the either side of the road. The entire stretch was full of waders and ducks, much higher in population compared to the previous year. Setting up the scope along the road for the counts sparked curiosity among many. One young boy, Shreyas was curious enough to make his father accompany us the entire day, and also helped us count Asian Dowitchers (*Limnodromus semipalmatus*) in the lake! The energetic young boy even persuaded his father to take a PDF copy of a bird field guide from me, so that it would help him in his future birding endeavours.

**Asian Dowitcher** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

As we moved further, we saw an increasing number of mixed flocks of waders consisting of Godwits, Stints, Plovers and Sandpipers. Looking through the scope, I could see Northern Pintails and Flamingos as far as the eye could see! At one point, we came across a big flock of Egrets, including two dark-morph Western Reef Egrets (*Egretta gularis*).

**Mixed flock of Egrets** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

**Peregrine Falcon** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Another great sighting was a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), perched on an electric pylon close to the road. Also present was a lone Eurasian Curlew, which gave us very good views.

**Eurasian Curlew** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

By the end of the day, we had spotted ducks like Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*), and many mixed flocks of waders, including Common Redshanks (*Tringa totanus*), Common Greenshanks (*Tringa nebularia*), etc, and I just couldn't wait for the following day to explore more!

**Indian Roller** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

**Red-crested Pochard** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Day 3: Irakam Island

The day started early with a visit to Irakam Island bordering Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. While travelling by boat to reach the island, a flock of Caspian Terns kept following the boat in the hope of some catch. After a hearty breakfast while soaking in the mild winter sun, we started birding on the island. On reaching the water body, we were greeted by a Eurasian Curlew, walking freely on the shore, not in the least bothered by our presence. Further ahead were a huge flock of Painted Storks and Asian Openbills, along with other waders like Common Redshank, Common Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*).

**Marsh Sandpiper** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), Northern Pintail and Common Teal (*Anas crecca*) too were in good numbers. Of course, we also had the Grey-headed Lapwing (*Vanellus cinereus*), which we have always had good sightings of on Irakam Island. On finishing Irakam sooner than expected, we decided to go back to SHAR road, to try and identify waders that were previously unidentified.

**Grey-headed Lapwing** (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

Reaching SHAR road before noon proved fruitful as we had the rest of the day to identify waders from the huge mixed flock. Spotting waders from Lawrence uncle's spotting scope was really advantageous since we could see all the features of the birds up close, which helped in differentiating one wader from the other. That's how we spotted all the waders we missed out on the second day like Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*), Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) and Temminck's Stint (*Calidris temminckii*).

Day 4: Nelapattu

Like the saying, "save the best for the last", we saved Nelapattu for the last day. On the way to the bund, I could hear herons and pelicans' calls ringing in the air. On reaching the bund, seeing herons, pelicans and egrets nesting in such huge numbers took my breath away! The place which was virtually empty last year, was brimming with life this time around. As we set the scope to count the birds, we couldn't comprehend where to start from! For as far as I could see, there were flocks of Pelicans, Herons, Openbills, Cormorants and Egrets nesting. Almost every species we spotted, except the Knob-billed Duck (*Sarkidiornis melanotos*), was either nesting or in the process of building a nest.

**Spot-billed Pelican with young** (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

One of the best sightings for me was seeing Eurasian Spoonbills nesting. What an amazing sight it was! Seeing Nelapattu brimming with life after a year of emptiness made me realise how vital wetlands are for these amazing creatures to survive.

**Eurasian Spoonbill** (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

Having finished the counts in Nelapattu, we returned to the urban jungle of Hyderabad the next day. Although, we spotted less raptors compared to the previous year, Pulicat threw up many surprises with regard to the water birds and their numbers.

**Greater Flamingo flock** (Photo: Umesh Mani)

**The group** (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

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# Asian Brown Flycatcher vs Brown-breasted Flycatcher

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Have you ever been in a difficult situation on field while identifying birds which look almost similar? I realized some birds can be REALLY difficult to distinguish from one another, for instance, the Asian Brown Flycatcher and Brown-breasted Flycatcher. Both belong to the Muscicapidae family. Here I have tried to provide some handy pointers that you can make use of while in the field.

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Muscicapidae
Genus: Muscicapa

**Asian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*):**
This bird is usually found in open woodland and cultivated areas, and is more of a canopy bird. It is 13 cm long. The upperparts are a little paler, mostly grey with a tinge of brown, and the underparts are pale, with a light grey-brown wash on its breast and flanks. Its bill is mainly black, with a little yellow on the lower mandible. Its legs are grey, and it has a conspicuous white eye ring.

**Asian Brown Flycatcher**
(Photo: Gokul Krishna Addanki)

**Brown-Breasted Flycatcher *(Muscicapa muttui)*:**
Unlike its cousin, this bird is found mostly in the lower levels of trees, usually in open broad-leaved forests. A little larger in size, it is around 14 cm long. The upperparts are olive brown, underparts have a more pronounced brown or grey-brown breast band, and its legs and feet are pale or flesh-coloured. The lower mandible is entirely pale. Like the Asian Brown Flycatcher, it has a conspicuous white eye ring.

**Brown-breasted Flycatcher**
(Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

**Fun Facts:**

- *Muscicapa* has a Latin origin, *musca* meaning 'to fly' and *capere* meaning 'to catch'.
- The Brown-breasted Flycatcher is also known as 'Layard's Flycatcher' (named after Layard, the famous ornithologist). Its scientific name *Muscicapa muttui* is a homage to Layard's loyal servant, Muttuswamy.

Happy identifying!

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## Bird of the Month

Umesh Mani

# Eurasian Wigeon (*Mareca penelope*)

**Eurasian Wigeon Female (L) and Male (R)** (Pulicat, December 24, 2017)

Order: Anseriformes
Family: Anatidae
Genus: *Mareca*
Species: *M. penelope*
Size: 42-52 cm

Description & distribution: The Eurasian Wigeon is a small dabbling duck that breeds in the northernmost reaches of Europe and Asia, and is a winter visitor to southern Asia (including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka) and Africa and, occasionally, to some parts of the United States, like the southern Appalachians and the Four Corners region in the South-west. It is also a common winter visitor in Great Britain and Ireland, though not so often in Scotland. The breeding male has a chestnut head with a creamy crown, small, narrow blue-grey bill, brownish pink breast, finely-speckled grey flanks and back, a bright white patch on the closed wings, dark green speculum, grey legs and feet, and black tail-coverts. In flight, broad white shoulder-patches near the leading edge of the wings are conspicuous. The female is generally lighter brown, with a brownish head, breast and flanks, and darker brown upperwings. Both show a white belly and rather pointed tail in flight. The eclipse male is similar to the female, but more rufous on head and breast.

Habitat & behaviour: The Eurasian Wigeon is a highly gregarious species outside the breeding season, and is seen in large flocks, often along with other species like Tufted Ducks, Common and Red-crested Pochards, Northern Pintails and others. It prefers open wetlands like open lakes, reservoirs, rivers, shallow grassy *jheels*, marshes with some vegetation, wet grasslands, tidal creeks and salt-marshes. It is a mixed surface feeder, feeding mainly by grazing on grass shoots, aquatic weeds, and a wide variety of leaves, stems, roots and seeds, on the waterside grasslands and wet paddy-fields; it may also sometimes up-end in shallow water while feeding. It is a strong and swift flier, often among the first to take off and reach heights when a threat is perceived. The call of the male is a shrill, piped whistle *wheeooo*, uttered in flight as well as when on the ground or in the water. The female, on the other hand, utters a growled *rawr*.

Nesting: The Eurasian Wigeon breeds during the summer months. Several males may compete with each other in courting one female, jostling for position. The breeding display of the male includes lifting the tips of folded wings to expose the white wing patch, raising the head while giving a whistled call and lowering the head to display the buffy crown patch. The nest is a shallow depression in the ground, lined with grass, down or vegetation, under cover of scrub or vegetation near the water. The usual clutch consists of 6-12 off-white or pale buff eggs.

Local name: The Eurasian Wigeon is known as *'Patari', 'Peasan', 'Pharia'* or *'Chhota lalsir'* in Hindi, *'Namam batu'* in Telugu, *'Mahudi thara'* in Tamil and *'Wijan'* in Punjabi.

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**For Private Circulation Only**
**Editors:** Shanti Mani, Umesh Mani **Email:** bsap.pitta@gmail.com

**For information, write to:** Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/bsap_online. **Website:** www.bsap.in. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*